TOUCH

February 14, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 1:40-45

"Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him,..."
Mark 1:41 (RSV)

The power of touch... The mystery of touch... The February 2 edition of the New York Times contained a fascinating article headed by a picture which immediately caught my eye. A tiny infant in an incubator... and a huge human hand touching the baby's back. The article reported on new research in the area of the care of premature babies. Doctors have long known that physical, human contact is good for newborn infants. Now, thanks to this new study, we know why. Dr. Tiffany Field at the University of Miami Medical School says that her research "suggests that certain brain chemicals released by touch, or others released in its absence, may account for an infant's thriving or failure to thrive."

Dr. Field carefully recorded the fact that premature infants who were gently massaged for fifteen minutes three times a day did dramatically better than babies who were not massaged. They ate more, gained weight 47% faster than babies left in incubators - therefore left the hospital sooner and, parenthetically, saved $3,000 per baby in hospital costs. Eight months later the massaged infants were still doing better.

Something very vital, something life-giving, happens when these little babies are touched. God has apparently made us that way... Life depends on human touch. The article went on to point out that baby massaging is fairly standard in every culture of the world; with the exception of Western culture which, in its concern for hygiene, moved in the direction of isolating infants. And yet parents instinctively know that the best way to calm a distressed child is to hold him or her; (that "physical contact is the ultimate signal to infants that they are safe,") and that every child knows instinctively that kissing it does make it better.

The power of touch... The mystery of touch... One time Jesus encountered a man with leprosy and touched him, and the man became clean and well. This incident, I would suggest, is enormously powerful, and contains within its dynamics a working definition of our religion, as well as metaphors for the human condition in the Twentieth Century.

The Christian religion is about God reconciling the whole creation; therefore Christianity is very much about social justice and peace and

the quality of human life lived in the world. The Christian religion is also about God reconciling individuals - redeeming, saving, and fostering spiritual rebirth - so it is highly personal and intimate as well.

When Jesus reached out and touched a man with leprosy, he expressed something radically important about both of those points of God's reconciliation - the corporate and the personal. Sometimes the evangelicals need a reminder that our religion has to do with the social, public life we live. And sometimes the social activists need to know that our religion has to do with our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is my opinion that we Presbyterians who, historically, have tried to maintain a middle position between those two stylistic alternatives - usually need both reminders.

That is precisely what we get in this wonderfully provocative incident in the first chapter of Mark. Mark begins his account of the life and ministry of Jesus on a dead run. The reader is immersed (to badly mix my metaphors) immediately in the complexities of the world of the first century; Jesus recruits his disciples, teaches in the Synagogue in Capernaum, confronts a strange wild man possessed by an unclean spirit, heals Peter's mother-in-law, deals with the sick of the whole village who have come looking for him, and then begins to move around Galilee teaching and healing. Then he meets a man with leprosy, and it is still very much Mark's prolegomenon to the rest of the story - it is the introduction.

One of the things going on beneath the surface of this very energetic account, is the impact on all of life caused by the basic religious concept of uncleanness. Without getting too pedantic about it, we need to understand that according to the Levitical Law and the custom of the time, people could become "unclean" (which meant unfit for worship or contact with other people) by eating foods that were taboo, for instance, or touching blood, or being around a corpse, or engaging in certain sexual practices, and - by having leprosy. Those taboos, when you think about them, often turn out to have some scientific justification: in some way they contribute to the life and health of the community.

But unclean meant unfit for worship in the Synagogue and for contact with other people. Unclean meant separated from God and the community. Unclean meant - an outcast, utterly alienated, utterly alone - without hope for reconciliation until the prescribed remedial rituals were performed, a priest verified that the individual was now "clean" (reconciled with God), and therefore fit for resumption of life in the community.

One of the ways you got to be unclean was by having leprosy. Now when the New Testament uses the term leprosy it actually refers to any discoloration or eruption of the skin. It included Hansen's Disease, the medical name for leprosy, but it included a lot more - every kind of rash, discoloration. To have leprosy was to be expelled from the community automatically. You had to wear specific clothing which identified you as a leper. You had to call out "unclean, unclean!" when someone approached you. And you had to live somewhere apart from the community - alone. If, by some chance, your skin problem cleared up, you went to the priest who determined that you are now clean.

So in the midst of this academic description what ought to be emerging in your imagination is a powerful portrait of isolation. The man is not attractive to look at, he is utterly cut off from the people he loves and wants and needs - his parents, wife, children. Worst of all he lives every day with the certainty that he is also cut off from God, that there is a profound confirmation of his social isolation. He isn't even fit to walk into the presence of his maker... Therefore, I would submit, this is a man suffering emotionally and spiritually about as deeply as it is possible to suffer.

This is the man who breaks all the rules and violates every convention - finds Jesus, runs up to him, falls down on his knees and says, "If you will you can make me clean." Notice, he did not ask Jesus to heal his leprosy, but to make him "clean." The thrust of this story is that this man didn't ask to have his skin cleared up - so he could get the approval of the priest - he asked Jesus to make him right with God and the community.

And that is what moves Jesus. "Moved with pity he stretched out his hand and touched him." Well, maybe. One of the great things about modern Biblical students is that we keep discovering new meanings to old stories which have been covered over in centuries of translating and copying. Recent Biblical scholarship is suggesting that what this scenario moves Jesus to is not pity and compassion - but anger. Some reliable ancient manuscripts read that way. And while I know our Lord was compassionate, I can see him in this incident - indignant, angry...

Here is a man who had become a victim of institutional religion's pomposity and exclusiveness.

Here is a man consigned to a hell of isolation and aloneness by religion.

Here is a man cut off from everything that gives human life dignity and meaning and beauty - not by the agents of Satan, or even Caesar in Rome - but by the self-righteous officials of the established religion and the well-meaning fears of religious people.

You bet he was angry. So angry he decided to engage in civil disobedience; to break the law, to do something no one did. He reached out and touched that man, and he said "My brother, you are clean... You are acceptable to and accepted by God your Creator the way you are, - with your leprosy,... rejoin the family... welcome home." And, incidentally, the leprosy did leave him. But in the context of the culture that is not nearly as memorable as the fact that Jesus touched him. And as mysterious as it used to be, not at all unbelievable if you remember how powerful the touch of a loving hand is for those babies.

This wonderful story is about a radical new idea,... a God who cares more about people than about the rules and customs and conventions of organized religion. A man reaches across the most serious taboo of his time and welcomes back to the human family, and to the open, embracing arms of a loving God - this utter outcast. This is an intensely personal story.

And this story is about religion: religion getting in the way of God's reconciliation of the world.

And it is about the real work which God has for religion in the scheme of things - namely, finding the untouchables and touching them, locating the outcasts and welcoming them back into the family.

The truth of this story transcends 20 centuries. There is no pain as severe as the pain of isolation. No suffering as deep as aloneness.

It was there in the 42nd Psalm -

> "My soul thirsts for God
> my tears have been my food
> day and night..."

The Psalmist remembers the time when all was well, when he was part of the community, the "glad throng."

But now... "Why are you cast down, O my soul, why are you disquieted within me?"

This is a man who is alone.

It is virtually impossible to read a novel, see a movie or go to a play without bumping into isolation - alienation. The theologians tell us that one of the prices of modern urban life is the reality of isolation, and spiritual aloneness.

One of Malcolm Boyd's painfully honest prayers reads - "I wasn't going to get lonely anymore, and so I kept very busy, telling myself I was serving you. But it's getting dark again, and I'm alone; honestly Lord, I'm lonely as hell... Take hold of me, Jesus." [Are You Running With Me, Jesus?, p. 14]

Jean Paul Satre suggested that hell is other people; but the modern experience is that aloneness is hell... and it is common - familiar to us all. We go to great and amusing lengths to deny it, or compensate for it - or to build instant communities to compensate for it.

In all of life, there are few things less honest and authentic than in the easy intimacy which high tech data processing keeps trying to presume -

> **Dear Mr. Buchanan,**
>
> **We are delighted to tell you that you have been chosen to become a property owner in Florida. Just fill in the application, Mr. Buchanan, and one of our representatives will be in touch Mr. Buchanan, we know you are a person of discrimination,** etc., etc., ad nauseam.

I was reminded of that by a piece in a recent Christian Century. William Willimon wrote about his 78 year old mother, in a way which reminded me very much of mine. Mrs. Willimon, a North Carolinian and a Methodist, received a birthday card addressed to Sarah, her first name, and signed Tom. She was mystified. She didn't know any Tom who knew her well enough to call her Sarah. Dr. Willimon had to explain that the church just bought a new computer and they were trying to be personal and that Tom was actually Dr. Smith, the pastor. "My mother was not amused," Willimon declared.

One of our best thinkers, Stanley Haverwas, said recently, "I believe we get the community we deserve. The machines mirror ourselves. We want efficiency more than we want community. Now we've got it."

There is no pain as severe as aloneness. For some of us physical isolation is a daily, uninterrupted reality. The premature babies taught us how life giving human touch is. One of the most devasting conversations I ever had was with an elderly woman, recently widowed, who moved into a nursing home and said, "What I miss most is the way we touched each other a hundred times all day long, or just a touch of hands, a pat on the arm as we passed. I've been here for six weeks and you are the first person to touch me..."

It is not easy for many of us to touch. We have been taught not to touch - men particularly. Touching is a kind of modern taboo. Curiously what began to change that, of all things, - I'm convinced - was not only the permission to embrace which the T groups and Sensitivity Training of the 70's encouraged, but the N.F.L. and "those huge linemen patting each other, hugging after a touchdown, and holding hands in the huddle."

Touch is powerful. Psychologists tell us that to withhold physical touching in a marriage or intimate relationship is often a very clear expression of hostility and anger. And likewise, to give it can be an expression of caring and love which is expressed fully in no other way. It is perhaps one of the saddest commentaries on our culture that we have to read books and go to workshops to relearn it.

Sometimes the pain results from emotional isolation. Our culture tells us to be strong, autonomous and self-reliant. We learn that lesson so thoroughly we can't begin to acknowledge our own needs. Sometimes we are so caught up in our obsession to be strong that we will not and cannot say the truth - "I need you and I love you." And so we are alone.

Sometimes the pain is physical. There is an isolation of physical pain which is very real. In intense pain we feel alone. Sensitive medical professionals - hospital employees, doctors, nurses - know it. They know that the soothing touch of a human hand almost always contributes to the alleviation of pain.

And sometimes the pain results from spiritual or moral isolation. This may be related to all the other types of isolation we experience - the literal hell in which the man with leprosy was living and that each of us, I am convinced, experiences from time to time. This isolation derives from our own souls. This isolation comes from our inability to forgive and

accept ourselves; therefore, our inability to comprehend the miracle of grace that God, in Jesus Christ, forgives and accepts us.

This is the isolation of the man with leprosy who was convinced that he was unclean. It is the hellish isolation we experience when we live out of our own moral failures... You've done something very wrong, and you're ashamed and sorry. But you can't shake it and it cuts you off from those you love. It gets between you and God, and you and the whole human race.

This is the isolation of people so caught up in their own pursuits of happiness and contentment, that the notion of a God of love and compassion, a God willing to give gifts of peace and joy and fullness - is simply incomprehensible.

The story is Gospel: good news of God's love which reaches across every separation and touches us. And it is a story about the purpose of authentic religion - the religion of Jesus. William Barclay once wrote:

> "It is the very essence of Christianity to touch the untouchables, to love the unlovelable, to forgive the unforgivable."
> [Daily Study Bible, p. 55, Luke]

It is our commission as followers of Jesus - our commission as a church of Jesus Christ - to locate and then touch those rendered untouchable by our culture's conventions, customs or religious traditions. That is the radical word of God here.

It is our special commission to guard against religion actually participating in the isolation, the shutting out of part of the family. It is our assignment to be especially careful - because religion has a way of doing just that - of keeping at arms length those the culture has called "unclean." We know who they are... the homeless, victims of AIDS, people whose sexual orientation is different from the mainstream, "throw away children" in the Foster Home system; the people walking the streets of our neighborhood - struggling with chemical addiction; the men, women and children caught in the sociological prison of the Chicago Housing Authority.

There is a radical and strong, and not always welcome challenge here. This story suggests that the God who made us is not content when we are isolated, cut off... It is a radical suggestion that God is in the business of reclaiming, loving, and welcoming those who are alone - back to the family.

So it is an invitation, finally, to recall those ways Jesus Christ has touched you. He has, I believe. He has in ways we may not have recognized. But by God's grace, Jesus Christ has reached into your life and touched you and is, perhaps, doing that now.

The glory of the good news of the Gospel at its simplest and best is in this story!...

The good word is for us - when we feel unclean, untouchable, unacceptable. The good word is for us - when we experience isolation and alienation from our loved ones, our friends, our families, our church, our selves, our God.

The good word here is about a Lord who stretched out his hand and touched the man... That is to say, a Lord who in marvelous and mysterious ways, continues to stretch out his hand and touch men and women, you and me - and in that touch to give us -

God's
acceptance
and forgiveness
and healing
and wholeness
and joy
and salvation
and life.

Lord God, you have touched us with grace and love... You have touched us with your creative love at our birth. You have touched us with life-giving energy and impatience - throughout our lives. So continue to love us... When we are lost find us, and when we know our uncleanness, touch us and reclaim us; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.